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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002275

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KN](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO GWANGJU: POLITICALLY
PROGRESSIVE, ECONOMICALLY BACKWARD

Classified By: Amb. Kathleen Stephens. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During the Ambassador's November 18-19 visit to Gwangju, it became clear that, politically, not much has changed in Korea's southwest region in the past ten years. Through discussions with various local leaders, it was evident that the region remained politically left of center, still felt economically disadvantaged, and harbored some anti-Americanism and resentment toward the more affluent Youngnam region. In addition, Korea's ongoing economic challenges -- increasing unemployment, declining investment, and the looming demographic crisis -- have had a greater impact in the provinces than is visible in Seoul. Overall, however, the Ambassador received a warm reception from official interlocutors and the citizenry that belied a history of anti-Americanism. Far more prevalent were complaints about unfilled economic and political promises from Seoul. End Summary.

¶2. (C) As part of the Ambassador's public outreach to the Korean provinces, on November 18-19, she traveled to the southwestern city of Gwangju, former President Kim Dae-jung's political base and, as the site of the May 18, 1980 citizens' rebellion against Chun Doo-hwan, termed by many as the birthplace of democracy in Korea. The Ambassador paid her respects at the May 18 National Cemetery and called on the Mayor. She also had the opportunity to engage in more substantive discussions about the current political and economic state of the North and South Jeolla Provinces -- commonly referred to as Honam. Over lunch with media executives and over dinner with a diverse group that included academics, an NGO representative, an American researcher, and a Korean businessman, the Ambassador was able to take the political temperature of a region that has historically considered itself -- with good reason -- to have been economically and politically disadvantaged by Seoul. In her discussions, this old animosity toward the central government and toward the neighboring Gyeongsang Provinces -- usually referred to as Youngnam -- proved to be alive and well in present-day Gwangju.

Economically Disadvantaged

¶3. (C) Over lunch with local media executives on November 18 the conversation focused on the relative lack of economic development in Honam. Yoon Young-kwan of Gwangju MBC noted that the central government had proposed designating five

economic development zones -- the Seoul Metropolitan area, Chungcheong, Honam, South Gyeongsang, and Daegu and North Gyeongsang -- to try to boost investment in these regions, but Yoon was skeptical that Honam would benefit significantly from this initiative. Moreover, Yoon said, the legislation currently before the National Assembly to lift restrictions on building factories in and around Seoul was disadvantageous to outer regions like Honam.

14. (C) The media executives agreed that the slow train line from Gwangju to Seoul was especially damning evidence of this economic discrimination. Park Ki-jung of Jeonnam Ilbo noted that it took much longer to travel from Seoul to Gwangju than from Seoul to Busan, which is in South Gyeongsang, even though they are roughly equidistant. The government had promised to remedy this through faster train lines, but it had yet to happen. Even though it took longer to get to Gwangju, Park complained, people paid the same amount. The Ambassador's dinner guests said that the historic tension between Gyeongsang and Jeolla -- evident in Park's allegations of discrimination -- persisted. This psychological separation was physically manifested and exacerbated, they said, by the very small number of roads connecting the two neighboring provinces.

15. (C) The demographic crisis was also having a profound impact on Honam. Kim Soon-kil of Kwangju Broadcasting Company (KBC) said this demographic problem was the most serious issue facing the region. Most young people continued to move to Seoul to pursue education and careers there. If you went to farms in Jeolla, Kim said, you would not find anyone under age sixty. It was particularly difficult for

young men to find wives, increasing the number of foreign brides -- mostly from China, the Philippines, and Southeast Asia. Park Ki-jung added that it was difficult for Korean society to accept the biracial children of these mixed marriages. The media had been trying to help by drawing attention to the problem and local governments were implementing programs to help the families adapt. Shin Hang-lag of Kwangju Ilbo agreed, observing that Koreans remained too preoccupied by homogeneity.

16. (C) The declining number of young people in the region was also discussed at dinner where Professor Kim Bong-joon from Chonnam University said that the unemployment rate was increasing in Gwangju. He said Chonnam students had a hard time finding work after graduation. The situation was bad nationwide, but worse in Gwangju, Kim said.

Politically Marginalized

17. (C) A persistent theme among the Ambassador's interlocutors was the continued discrimination against the Honam region by the central government. MBC Gwangju reporter Yoon Young-kwan said the gap persisted between the central government's attention and investment allocation to Honam and to other areas of Korea. Kim Dae-jung's presidency had helped and so had Roh Moo-hyun's although to a lesser extent. The current administration, however, was very focused on the southeastern provinces of Gyeongsang, and that made the people of Gwangju feel that they were once again being overlooked. Park Ki-jung said people were particularly alienated by Lee Myung-bak's personnel selection, which favored candidates from Yeungnam.

18. (C) At dinner Professor Kim, with a good deal of irony, observed that Koreans were very emotional and tended to form pre-conceived notions about people that were intractable. As an example he said that, when Roh Moo-hyun was president, Kim had a friend from Gyeongsang who hated Roh. Kim had argued with his friend and demanded five reasons for his antipathy, which his friend was unable to produce. He noted with a great deal of humor that he now felt the same way about President Lee Myung-bak. Later, when Kim expressed enthusiasm about the Ambassador's description of the WEST

(Work, English Study, Travel) Program, the Ambassador noted that this had been a joint initiative of President Lee and President Bush. Kim jokingly said that someone must have given Lee the idea because he never could have come up with such a good policy on his own.

Perceptions of the U.S.

¶19. (C) At lunch the media executives agreed that anti-U.S. sentiment in the region had decreased relative to what it used to be. Kim Soon-kil of KBC said that, when Chun Doo-hwan had controlled the government, there was a perception that the United States had "let" him take over. Time had passed, however, and people had largely moved on.

¶10. (C) At dinner, Professor Kim, who taught American history, said that, while less pervasive than before, at least among students a negative and overly-simplistic view of the U.S. persisted. As an example Kim said that his students believed that a Republican president would be more willing to attack North Korea than a Democratic president. Kim noted that historically, the U.S. and North Korea had come closest to conflict under Democratic administrations.

¶11. (C) Kim and Sheena Choi, a Fulbright researcher at Chonnam University, explained that Koreans had such a mixed view of Americans because they -- especially those living in rural areas -- had had two very different experiences with Americans. One was with missionaries and the Peace Corps volunteers, an experience that all agreed was overwhelmingly positive largely because the missionaries were instrumental in developing Korea's education system. The other primary U.S. interlocutor for most Koreans had been U.S. military personnel, who used to have a very negative image among

Koreans but, they claimed, that too was slowly changing.

¶12. (C) At both meetings the Ambassador mentioned her visit that morning to the monument and museum memorializing the Gwangju Uprising -- referred to in Korean as the 5-1-8 Incident, named for the day, May 18, the protests started. She noted that she thought the museum did an excellent job of presenting Korea's struggle for democracy and in expressing the desire to share that experience with the rest of the world. The lunch participants, in particular, clearly appreciated the Ambassador's observation. Yoon Young-kwan said that last year Gwangju had invited two democracy activists from Asia to learn about Korea's democratization. They hoped to continue such programs to help promote the spread of democracy.

Comment

¶13. (C) The Honam region retains many of its old animosities, especially toward Seoul and its historic nemesis of neighboring Youngnam. These entrenched perceptions make the relative decline in anti-Americanism all the more noteworthy. Clearly, some negative perceptions of the United States remain, particularly among students. However, the notable change in attitudes toward the U.S. at the same time underscores the importance of continued Embassy outreach programs to the region.

STEPHENS